

ROBERT MORRISON: HERALD OF THE MATCHLESS MUSIC ON THE SHORES OF CATHAY

March 26, 2007 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article) -

The following biographical sketch is from *Heroes of Faith on Pioneer Trails* by E. Myers Harrison, former pastor of Judson College Church, Rangoon, Burma; copyright 1945 by Moody Bible Institute. A reprint is available from Bethel Baptist Print Ministry. The phone number is 519-652-2619.

These are excellent stories to read in family devotions or to use in other contexts with children. It is important to keep the Greatest Work on Earth, which is missionary work, before our children and youth and to pray that the Lord will send forth laborers into His harvest. The essence of fruitful Christian living is death to self and surrender to God's will, and few things exhibit this more powerfully than sacrificial missionary work. Sadly, very few Bible believing Christians today are familiar with the challenging stories of influential pioneer missionaries of past days.

O rock, rock! when wilt thou open?" This was the despairing cry of the [apostate Roman Catholic] Xavier in 1552 as he lay dying of fever on the island of Sancian, within sight of the forbidden coasts of China. "O mighty rock! impenetrable rock! when wilt thou open to my Lord?" was the impassioned lament of Valignini, Xavier's successor, as he gazed in sadness at the same inaccessible shores. Shut in by the massive mountains of Tibet on the west, by the Great Wall and Gobi desert on the north, by the mighty deep on the east, by the ocean and towering mountains on the south, and by the exclusive attitudes of her people, China had been for many centuries a vast sealed rock to the heralds of the Cross of Christ; and such it continued to be for more than two and one-half centuries.

In the year 1813 an Englishman and his Chinese assistant, A-ko, were seated at a table in a room lined with books in the city of Canton. It was night and the windows were carefully covered to prevent the escape of light. The table was covered with books and manuscripts.

"Sir," said the young Chinaman, "why do you go on with the work of translation in the face of such dangers? If it should become known that you are a missionary in disguise, that you are learning the Chinese language and translating the Christian Scriptures, and if you should fall into the hands of the Chinese, you would certainly be killed according to the edicts and practices of our government. Do you not see that our land and the hearts of our people are utterly closed to you and your religion?"

"Yes," replied the foreigner; "but it is written, 'Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?' (Jer. 23:29). This Bible is the one thing that can burn gates of brass and penetrate walls of rock. I cannot preach to the people, but I can secretly translate and circulate this Book, with the confidence that its divine message will operate with divine power. Look, A-ko, at the verse we have just commenced to translate: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest!' (Matt. 11:28). When my own heart was as hard as stone and I was a slave to sin, this verse pierced my soul, struck off my shackles, and introduced me to Jesus. Thus my life was changed completely. Does not this verse shine into your soul, A-ko, with the beauty of a priceless diamond? Does it not sing to your heart in tones of matchless music? As you read this verse, do you not hear a voice of infinite tenderness offering the fulfillment of that which you know to be your uttermost need?"

A priceless diamond!

The matchless music!

A Voice of infinite tenderness!

The man who thus pleaded for a soul, and whose fiery zeal eventually won A-ko as his first convert, was Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to Cathay-as China used to be called. The verse of Scripture so dear to his heart has been a favorite of millions. Augustine, Christian bishop in North Africa in the fifth century, said: "I have read in Plato and in Cicero many sayings that are very wise and very beautiful, but I never read in either of them such words as these: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'"

Robert Morrison had ample reason to love this text. It was

THE VOICE OF DELIVERANCE TO HIS STRICKEN SOUL.

Robert Morrison was born in Morpeth, England, January 5, 1782. His father was a farmer who, in Robert's third year, moved to Newcastle to become a last and boot tree maker. After completing his elementary education, Robert was apprenticed to his father's trade at the age of fourteen and learned as a lad the meaning of long hours of exacting labor, his workday usually lasting from six A.M. till at least six or seven at night. Having an avid appetite for knowledge, he often cast furtive glances at an open book on the workbench and he was frequently absorbed in reading far into the night.

Another element in the making of his character is to be found in the historical traditions and associations of the region of his youth. Northumbria's castles, its peel towers and Roman wall tell of heroic days. At Jarrow had lived the Venerable Bede, who had labored

till his dying moment to translate the book of John into the language of the people. Another of Northumbria's heroes of faith was brave old Bishop Ridley, who was slowly roasted to death for Christ's sake over against Baliol college in Oxford. And not far distant, just off the Northumberland coast, was Lindisfarne, the Holy Isle, which Columban monks had made an abode of piety, a home of learning and a seat of missionary zeal in a dark and heathenish age.

Robert's parents were earnest Christians, the father being an honored elder of the Presbyterian Church and the Convener of a Praying Band which met on Monday nights in his workshop; Robert learned to pray at "that best academe," his mother's knee. At an early age he began to read the Bible and to memorize choice portions. Though his was not a brilliant mind, he tackled any given task with extraordinary tenacity. Thus, at the age of twelve, he repeated from memory at church one Sabbath evening the 176 verses of the 119th Psalm.

At the age of fifteen Robert became acutely sin-conscious. "The fears of death compassed me about," he said, "and I was led to cry mightily to God that he would pardon my sin." He was thinking in part of the sins he had committed in the company of godless companions--sins of profanity, of evil imaginings, and of liquor drinking; but he also had in mind the innate sin of his unregenerate heart. So great was the burden, he felt crushed beneath its weight.

During this crisis Robert first heard and heeded the matchless music of Matthew 11:28. In moving language he has described the stupendous event:

"O blessed Jesus, long have I sought for rest to my immortal soul, at one time in the gratification of 'the lusts of the flesh' and at another 'of the mind.' When very young, I was a companion of the drunkard, the sabbath-breaker, the swearer, the profane person; but in these my heart smote me, I had no rest. Then I made learning and books my God; but all, all are vain! I come to Thee for Thou hast said: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' Fatigued with unsuccessful pursuits after happiness and burdened with a sense of guilt, I come to Thee, Jesus, Thou Son of God, that I may be refreshed and my burden removed.

"Jesus! my Lord, thou art possessed
Of all that fills th' eternal God!
Oh! bring my weary soul to rest,
Remove my guilt, that pond'rous load!"

Thus his heart began to sing the ever-recurring refrain.

The matchless music!

The music that wooed him to the Saviour!

The music that lifted his ponderous load!

The music that refreshed his weary soul!

After an experience so transcendent and ineffable, it occasions no surprise to find Matthew 11:28 inscribed over the Wicket Gate of Robert Morrison's spiritual pilgrimage. The text was

THE WORD OF SALVATION TO HIS FELLOW SINNERS.

Following his conversion, young Morrison promptly united with the Presbyterian Church, joined the Praying Band referred to earlier, became a diligent student of the Scriptures, and began to evince a pronounced concern for the salvation of lost souls. "O God, my Saviour," he prayed, "enkindle within me an ardent love for the souls of my poor fellow sinners." He spoke of divine grace to a young relative, a sailor, with such importunity, that his words rang in the young man's ears day and night until he repented and surrendered to the Saviour.

Similarly, a female domestic in the family was brought to a saving acceptance of the gospel and died shortly thereafter, rejoicing in Christ. His concern for unsaved relatives led to much prayer, many tears, and diligent efforts. Thus he writes to one of his sisters: "My dear, dear Hannah, do think of your soul now, set heaven and hell and a dying Saviour before you. I stand in doubt of you, lest you still be in an unconverted state. Forgive me, forgive me; it is not in harshness, but in love to your precious soul that I speak. Come to Jesus, Hannah; come to Jesus."

"Come unto Me!" said Salvation's gracious offer.

"Come to Jesus!" echoed one who had tasted its felicity.

Morrison's yearning to win the lost was intensified as he came into fuller understanding of God's Word. Taught by the Holy Spirit, he came to see that Matthew 11:28 and Revelation

22:17 are indissoluble parts of one mighty truth. "Come!" says Matthew 11:28.

"And let him that heareth say, Come!" adds Revelation

22:17. Hearing is to be followed by saying. It is the expectation of Christ that all who have heard love's tender call shall repeat the gracious invitation; that all who have heard the gentle accents of the Saviour's "Come!" shall evermore sing to other weary souls the

sweet song of redemption's story. Under the impulse of this epochal discovery, the claims of the gospel ministry as a life work appealed strongly to Morrison. But the demands of so high a calling almost overwhelmed him. In the course of arriving at a decision, he submitted himself to a most thorough self-examination as the following extract from his diary reveals:

"Dost thou, my soul, desire the office of a minister of Christ? Do I certainly know what Christ is to me? Hath the Holy Ghost emptied me of self in every form? Am I taking this honor to myself or am I called of God as was Aaron? Is Christ sending me and laying a necessity upon me to preach the gospel? Is He breathing on my soul and causing me to receive the Holy Ghost? Is he enduing me with a deep compassion for the souls of men, a vivid sense of my own unfitness, an earnest desire to be made meet and sanctified for my Master's use, and a cheerful willingness to suffer poverty, contempt, and the hatred of men for Christ's sake?"

After an extended period of scrutiny and prayer, Morrison concluded that he was indeed called of God "to serve the gospel of Christ." This decision led him to London to become a student in the Hoxton Academy, an institution for the training of Congregational ministers. He combined intense application to his studies with preaching assignments under the London Itinerant Society. His sermons, conversations, and letters were vibrant with one perennial theme--the need of Christ and the claims of the gospel. The following is typical:

"When we look back on the sins of our youth, what abundant reason have we to blush and to cry, 'Lord, remember them not against me.' The years that roll on and pass away remind us that eternity is approaching. O who knows, or who feels, the full force and meaning of the word eternity? Who ever weighed the two extremes, 'eternal punishment' and 'eternal life'? O that you may act as a poor sinner should--flee to Christ for refuge."

"Come unto Me!" said the text.

"Flee to Christ for refuge!" reiterated the zealous young theologian. The text was

THE INVITATION OF DIVINE LOVE TO ALL MANKIND.

Various influences combined, under the Spirit's operation, to extend yet more in Morrison's thinking the enlarging circle of those to whom the gospel story should be proclaimed. At the age of seventeen he was deeply moved by reading in the *Evangelical Magazine* and the *Missionary Magazine* stirring accounts of the labors of William Carey and other missionaries. Contact in London with a returned missionary who had brought with him several converted Hottentots intensified his missionary interest and led to much searching of heart as to the will of God for his own life.

"Lord Jesus," he wrote, "I have given myself up to Thy service. The question with me is, where shall I serve Thee? I learn from Thy word that it is Thy holy pleasure that the gospel shall be preached in all the world. My desire, O Lord, is to engage where laborers are most needed and the field most difficult. Enable me to count the cost, and save me from every motive but a desire to serve Thee and to promote the welfare of the souls of men."

The word "all" came to have new significance, as Morrison discerned that the universality of sin, of the gospel invitation, and of Christ's commission are coextensive.

"ALL have sinned" reveals the universal need of the gospel.

"Come unto Me . . . ALL ye" reveals the universal offer of the gospel.

"Into ALL the world" reveals the universal scope of the gospel.

Morrison was at length fully convinced that God had appointed him to be a herald of the matchless music to some nation across the sea. Accordingly, he made application to the London Missionary Society for acceptance as a missionary. He was appointed May 28, 1804, and directed to proceed to the Missionary Academy at Gosport. In August, 1805, he went to London to pursue special studies in medicine, astronomy, and Chinese, since China had been determined upon as his field of endeavor. The officers of the Society were well aware that a protagonist of Christianity would under no circumstances be permitted to preach in any section of China, hence they assigned to Morrison the one objective of mastering Chinese and of translating the Scriptures into that tongue. The eyes and heart of the young missionary appointee, however, were set on nothing less than the salvation of 350,000,000 Chinese. His conception of the magnitude and grandeur of the task to which he was committed is indicated in his statement:

"England's king has many affairs in foreign lands, commercial, political and martial; and it would be England's disgrace if she could find no able and enlightened men and veteran servants to engage in these important missions. And Zion's King has important affairs in all lands; embassies of pardoning mercy to the guilty; of peace to the bitterest enemies; of salvation to perishing sinners; of conflict with the powers of darkness where Satan and idols are enthroned; and it is the disgrace of our Zion that she sends not some of the ablest and wisest and holiest of her servants."

Having decided to proceed to Canton by way of the United States, Morrison set sail from Gravesend January 31, 1807, and, after a tempestuous voyage of 109 days, reached New York City. While there he was the recipient of many kindnesses, but the attitude of one of the merchants with whom he conversed was far from encouraging. With an air of suppressed ridicule on his face, the merchant said, "And so, Mr. Morrison, you really

expect that you will make an impression on the idolatry of the great Chinese Empire?" "No, sir," said Morrison, "but I expect that God will."

On May 12th Morrison set sail on the Trident. The journey took him round the Cape and across the Indian Ocean. After many dangerous experiences during 113 days at sea, he reached Canton safely, Sunday, September 7th.

He obtained lodging in one of the buildings erected by the East India Company and commenced his mission, in the face of many obstacles. Living costs were exorbitant. Hence, in the interest of economy and in an attempt to win Chinese favor, he ate Chinese food, wore Chinese clothes, fixed his hair in a queue and became adept in using chopsticks. He secured a large number of Chinese books on varied subjects and discreetly looked about for aid in learning the language. It was a capital offense to teach the language to a foreigner, but money is powerful and Morrison finally secured two men to assist him. Both of them lived in constant fear of detection and carried poison with which to end their lives, if apprehended, rather than endure the tortures to which they would be subjected.

February 20, 1809, was a memorable day in Morrison's life, for on this day he was married to Miss Mary Morton at Macao and received from the East India Company's Factory appointment as Chinese translator at a salary of 500 pounds per annum. Miss Morton was the daughter of an English merchant. Her health being in a critical state and Chinese restrictions making it impossible for foreign women to reside in Canton, Morrison was in constant anxiety during the six months of every year when his official duties with the Company compelled him to be absent from Macao. His distress of mind is indicated by numerous entries in his Diary, of which the following is typical: "Yesterday I arrived at Canton . . . I left my dear Mary unwell, her feeble mind much harassed. O Lord, help her and have mercy on her for Jesus Christ's sake."

Anxiety turned to grief, for their first-born son died on the day of his birth.

Morrison was eager to devote all his time and energies to the high business of Scripture translation. Nevertheless, he welcomed the appointment as translator for the East India Company because it would free the Christians in England from the financial strain of his support and would give him security of residence in Canton. It is certain that, except for this appointment, his real design would have been discovered by the Chinese and he would have been compelled to leave the country.

Foreigners were strictly confined to the area called Whangpoa, where the factories were located. They could not enter Canton proper unless engaged in important official business. As Morrison, in pursuance of his duties, walked the streets of Canton, he saw much to sadden his soul.

"My heart melts within me," he says, "because of the superstitions and idolatrous rites of the people. They have, in one street or another, and to one demon or another, perpetually splendid illuminations, music, theatrical performances in the presence of their idols, repasts of fruit, wine, fowls and roasted pigs placed before them, with the burning of candles, paper and fireworks. I have seen them prostrate themselves to the full-orbed moon, pour out libations and present fruits to her. O how lamentable is the situation of the millions of Chinese unacquainted with our Lord Jesus. This is not a time to be idle. We shall not have to reproach ourselves for having published the truth of the gospel among ignorant, deluded, guilty men. O Calvary! Calvary! O my Saviour! May Thy love constrain me, not to live to myself, but to Thee."

In the face of appalling need, the missionary's thought turned as if by instinct to the theme of all his hopes and longings. He was thinking of--

The matchless music!

The music of Calvary!

The music of the Saviour's love!

The music of the gospel invitation to ALL mankind!

While assiduously engaged in the work of preparing a Chinese dictionary and of translating the Scriptures, Morrison made serious efforts to lead to Christ several Chinese who from time to time helped him in his language study and translation. He had faith to believe that some day there would be millions of Christian Chinese, but he longed to see some fruit of his labors. It was, therefore, a time of great rejoicing and of encouragement when, almost six years after his arrival in Canton, he was privileged to baptize his first convert, Tsae A-ko. This took place July 16, 1814. Referring to this joyous event, Morrison says:

"Oh that the Lord may cleanse him from all sin in the blood of Jesus, and purify his heart by the influences of the Holy Spirit. May he be the first-fruits of a great harvest; one of millions who shall believe and be saved from the wrath to come."

In January, 1815, Mrs. Morrison with the two children sailed for England, seeking a restoration of health—a mission that kept her away from China for six years. Morrison was now desperately lonely, in constant apprehension, weary in spirit and plagued by severe headaches. In a letter to a friend in America, he states:

"I am still engaged in translation and in compiling the dictionary, which is very laborious work. My courage and perseverance almost fail me . . . This is a very lonely situation . . . I am under continual dread of the arm of the oppressor, and more than that, the natives

who assist me are hunted from place to place and sometimes seized. I have been here these ten years now. I feel myself comparatively an old man . . . what a blessing it is to have the hope of eternal life rising brighter and brighter as we enter the valley."

The lonely, sick but indefatigable missionary continued his labors until, on Nov. 25, 1819, he completed the herculean task of translating the Old and New Testaments into Chinese. The vision which had animated his prolonged labors and the exhilaration of spirit which marked their successful termination, are clearly set forth in words which he penned that day to the directors of the Missionary Society in London:

"I trust that the gloomy darkness of pagan skepticism will be dispelled by the dayspring from on high, and that the gilded idols of Buddha, and the numberless images which fill the land, will one day assuredly fall to the ground, before the force of God's Word, as the idol Dagon fell before the ark."

"Come unto Me!" urged the text. Morrison labored in the confident expectation that through the translated Word multitudes would hear and heed the matchless invitation. The text was

THE CALL OF CHRIST TO THE HOMELAND OF THE SOUL.

Although Morrison was worn and weary, he continued his labors in the furtherance of the gospel with unabated devotion. He compiled and published his monumental Chinese Dictionary, gathered about him ten baptized converts as the seed-corn of a great harvest, and founded the Anglo-Chinese College at Malacca, an island off the Malayan archipelago. At this institution Chinese converts were trained to preach the gospel, and a printing press was set up. From this press came forth dictionaries, grammars, tracts, and the Holy Scriptures--literally "millions of pages containing the truths of the everlasting gospel." Remembering the traditions of Iona, the Holy Isle off the coast of his native Northumbria, Morrison longed to make Malacca the "Iona of the East,"--a Christian light in pagan darkness, a seat of true piety, a center of holy zeal for missionary conquests. "By faith" he was creating an army of occupation and the tools of victory against the day, then unseen, when the Chinese rock would open to the gospel.

A vivid sense of the unseen was characteristic of Robert Morrison. His eyes were ever turned toward the future and his hopes centered in things invisible. Soon after his conversion he expressed the fervent hope that the same Lord who had stretched out His arm "to pluck me as a brand from the burning" would ever "attend me and bring me safe to my wished-for home, my Father's house in heaven." On reaching China after his long, hazardous journey, he wrote: "To float twenty-two thousand miles in safety, on a few planks nailed together and called a ship, is a circumstance that should excite the warmest gratitude; but ah! what is that, compared to passing through this present life, a sea of trouble, and reaching the haven of eternal rest!" How fitting that the last message he

prepared before departing this life, August 1, 1834, in Canton, was on the text: "In my Father's house are many mansions . . . I go to prepare a place for you . . . I will come again . . . that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2, 3).

Because of her failing health, Mrs. Morrison and the younger children had been compelled to return to England, and so Morrison and his eldest son were alone in Canton. Like Martyn and Brainerd, he had undoubtedly shortened his life by his rigorous and unsparing devotion to duty, so that he entered his Father's house at the age of 52.

As earth receded and the everlasting doors swung ajar, Robert Morrison heard once again the rapturous strains of the matchless music.

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